

DESIGN AND EXECUTION OF A
RELIGIOUS MURAL

A Report of a Creative Project
Presented to
The Graduate Division
Drake University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
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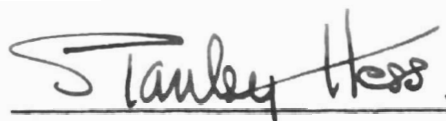
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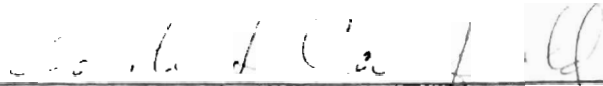

Dean of the Graduate Division

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the 1962 summer school session at Drake University, the writer searched for a graduate project to be completed during the summer session of 1963. After conversing with Richard Heggen, creator of an industrial mural in the summer of 1961, with Karl Mattern, a previous professor of art at Drake University, and Leonard Good, Head of the Art Department at Drake University, the writer decided that he would also paint a mural as a creative project for his Master of Fine Arts degree. After making this decision, the writer's first thought was that of the possibility of painting a mural in the new contemporary modern Messiah Lutheran Church which was recently erected in Burlington, Iowa.

The writer's first task was to contact Reverend Kindschuh, pastor of the Messiah Lutheran Church, and the church architect, Charles Edward Stade. These gentlemen were pleased with his idea, and made an appointment to meet with the writer on a Saturday afternoon. The pastor, architect, and writer discussed the relationship the mural should have with the architecture. It was their desire to incorporate a mural based upon Christ's life in the interests

and viewpoints of children under twelve years of age, as it was to be placed in the Sunday School worship center. Mr. Stade requested to see some of the artist's previous paintings to obtain an idea of what he could create.

After receiving the pastor's and architect's mutual approval, the writer discontinued plans for the mural until the Spring of 1963.

The writer continued his work in the spring after meeting with Mr. William Sharkey, parish administrator of the Messiah Lutheran Church, and the church board to receive approval for plastering the desired wall on which the mural could be painted.

To facilitate planning the sketches in regard to subject matter, the writer again met with the pastor to consider the selection of Biblical events illustrating the life of Christ that could be placed in the mural. Sunday School pamphlets and informational texts were then provided for the writer's use.

The Sunday School worship room was later re-visited and measurements were taken of the proposed wall area for the mural. The pastor and parish administrator then requested that the artist submit a small scale drawing of the mural for consideration.

I. FUNCTION OF THE MURAL

A study of murals and mural painting prior and during

the rendering of the preliminary sketches was conducted. Information that proved very valuable in terms of solving some mechanical problems came through research. The following general requirements were stressed in The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques by Ralph Mayer and Painting In America by E. P. Richardson as being very important in executing a good mural:

1. Monumental enough to be an enrichment of the building rather than an insertion, or patch, upon its fabric.
2. Harmonious enough to be seen as a unit.
3. Dramatic enough to give the room life and atmosphere of its own.
4. Complex enough to be seen again and again (for the room must be used and lived in), yet still reveal new details or suggest new thoughts.¹
5. It must be absolutely permanent under the conditions to which it is to be exposed for the life of the building. These include the necessary washing or cleaning which is periodically given to walls.
6. It should present a dead flat (mat) finish so that it may be viewed from all angles without undue glare or reflections such as one gets from an oil or varnish surface.
7. The design or picture must be laid out with the understanding that the spectator is ambulatory rather than stationed at an arbitrary fixed point, as in the viewing of easel paintings.
8. The painting must have a mural quality--a very definite, but somewhat intangible character which includes a certain degree of appropriateness to the architecture and function of the room; if it is to be painted in a completed building, it must be planned to fit into the architectural design rather than to give the impression of being a surface adornment. Proceeding along these lines,

¹E. P. Richardson, Painting In America (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1956), p. 356.

our definition runs into aesthetics, which is beyond the scope of the present account. The means of accomplishment are as many as there are schools of artistic thought. A familiar admonition is to maintain the two-dimensional or plane surface feeling of the work as a whole: **subjects**, whether pictorial or decorative, may be presented in full perspective or recession but not so as to create "holes" in the wall.¹

After having completed study and research at Cowles Library, Drake University; Art Center Library, Des Moines; Burlington Library, Burlington; and Parsons Library, Parsons College; and using friends and personal references, a study was made of existing local murals. Excellent first-hand information was available at the Art Center in the form of a fresco, painted by Jean Charlot who is now Head of the Art Department at the University of Hawaii. This mural had been painted in 1956 when Charlot was artist in residence at the Art Center. Other first hand information was available in the work of Professor Stan Hess, Drake University, who has many outstanding murals in the Des Moines area.

A study of these murals was made in regard to the solution of problems of over-all design, pattern, composition, mood and portrayal of subject matter. Murals used by Hess in this study are located in the Y. M. C. A.

¹Ralph Mayer, The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), pp. 340-41.

building at 101 Locust, National Travelers Life Insurance Company at 820 Keosauqua Way, Mercy Hospital at Fifth Street and Ascension Avenue, and in the Iowa Power and Light Company on Ninth Street at Walnut Avenue, all in Des Moines.

Drake University is quite fortunate to have a mural painted by the famous American artist, Stuart Davis, which is located in Hubbell Dining Hall. The mural is painted in oil on canvas in an abstract posterlike style.

As the writer continued his study, it became evident that each particular mural that has withstood the test of time is one which shows the factors which are presented in a comment from the book, Fresco Painting: Its Art and Technique, by James Ward.

The arrangements and composition of line restfulness, of the masses of form and the harmonic balance and purity of color are among the primary essentials of mural painting, and all these indispensable requisites of this form of Art are due to its contact with architecture. While bearing this in mind we must not forget that painting has its special functions apart from those of architecture, which include a controlling power over form and color, and the faculty of illustrating ideas by means of the representation of a theme or incident, a subject or a story.¹

Information accumulated from various libraries, personal references, and from the studies of local murals was used in putting into visual terms the drawings of Christ's life. These drawings after many submissions and

¹James Ward, Fresco Painting: Its Art and Technique (London: Chapman and Hall, Limited, 1909), p. 2.

revisions were incorporated into a scale drawing of the proposed mural.

II. THE PROBLEM AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS

The problem involved was designing and executing a religious mural for the Messiah Lutheran Church in Burlington, Iowa. The mural was to be eight and one-half feet high at one end and nine and one-half feet high at the other end of a wall which is fifteen feet wide. The mural was to be painted on a plastered wall. It was to involve several episodes from Christ's life, stylized to correspond with the contemporary architecture of the building. Each section or episode of the mural will be composed in a partially open style so the whole wall is united.

III. ORGANIZATION

Simplicity was a problem that needed a great deal of consideration in designing this mural, due to the architecture. Jean Charlot stated,

In spite of complex subject matter the muralist must preserve in the total view a certain simplicity, for complexity can be absorbed by the human eye to saturation, but past that point becomes confusion.¹

Similarly one of the aims of organization is to limit the

¹Jean Charlot, Murals in Georgia (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1945), p. 35.

amount included in a subject by not letting the diversification growing out of an idea to get out of control. An individual can attend to a limited number of things at one time. He cannot look at a dozen unrelated colors or a dozen isolated forms at the same time, and no art object should impose such a strain upon him.¹

Another problem that presented itself was that of color. The color scheme of the Sunday School worship room presented little difficulty, but the type of drawing involved in the mural, which is architectural but partially realistic to satisfy the interests and viewpoints of children under the age of twelve years, was a problem.

IV. COMPOSITIONAL REQUIREMENTS

The main problems in designing the mural as encountered in technical and compositional factors which could be listed as follows:

1. To design a mural in a medium that could be applied over plaster, and a medium that could be cleaned by washing.
2. To compose a mural that would be just as interesting in close propinquity as it would be from the far end of the room, over twenty feet away.

¹Ray Faulkner, Edwin Ziegfeld and Gerald Hill, Art Today (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1941), p. 166.

3. To compose a mural that would hold the attention of children under twelve years of age and at the same time give them a sense of identification with it.

CHAPTER II

DESIGN OF THE MURAL

All authorities, while considering the special needs of mural design, agree that a mural's larger size, its visibility from more varied angles, and its architectonic affiliations require extra attention to certain principles of design. Ray Faulkner, Edwin Ziegfeld, and Gerald Hill, authors of "Art Today," explain the general reasons for having design and that design serves us in several ways which proved a help to the design of the author's mural.

First, careful employment of the principles of design should aid the artist in communicating his idea to the observer. Thus if a designer wishes to create an exciting, dramatic building for a¹ new movie theater, he will organize all parts of the building to produce that effect. In contrast, if he wishes to give an effect of restfulness, ease, and quiet, such as is desirable in a library, he will stress a different type of organization. The step in communicating the idea is to engage the observer's attention, to focus it on the art object. This is no small task in a world full of lively stimuli hitting our sense organs from all sides.

¹Faulkner, Ziegfeld and Hill, op. cit., p. 227.

Sometimes the artist has to make his design shout above the clamor of conflicting forces in order to gain our attention. To do this he may resort to strong color contrasts, dynamic diagonal lines or forms, or pictures of unusual objects.¹

Second, design aims to organize the appearance of objects so that they are more readily comprehensible and useful. Nature, in many of her aspects, is chaotic and unorganized from the standpoint of human use. In order to make nature serve our purposes we reorganize her resources: We shift and alter the objects in order to produce a well-composed painting.

Third, design often aims to give the observer experiences which are new and expanding, which take him away from the humdrum repetition of eating, sleeping, and working. A magnificent combination of colors, whether in a sunset or an abstract painting, is an event at once stimulating and satisfying.²

Having done research at the Cowles Library at Drake University, at the Art Center Library in Des Moines, the Fairfield Library in Fairfield, and the Messiah Lutheran Church Library in Burlington, the writer combined some of

¹Ibid., p. 228.

²Faulkner, Ziegfeld and Hill, op. cit., p. 237.

this information with that gathered from a study of local Des Moines murals. This information was used in drawing preliminary sketches for the proposed mural.

The general appearance of the mural was changed many times before the design was considered complete. The episodes from Christ's life were reduced to a smaller number several times. The original design contained twenty-two episodes; the completed design contains eleven episodes, reducing the number to half. The most important episodes from Christ's life still remain in the design of the mural, but with the reduced number of episodes the design was easier to be worked with and therefore improved. One episode in the life of Christ logically flows into another scene without any distracting break in the design itself. This transitional method of eliding one episode into another is one aspect in which Thomas Benton, a well known American artist, carries out in his murals. Benton's most recent completed mural is on display in the Truman Memorial Library in Independence, Missouri, and, although changes in his personal style are noticeable, he uses the same general plan of dissolving one scene into the next that he used in his murals for the New School for Social Research in New York City, and for his state capitol decorations in Jefferson, Missouri.

A little to the right of the center in the writer's

mural, Christ is seated on a rock with five children gathered around him. The five children are simply dressed in modern clothes of today. This gives the mural a touch of the new with the old, in an attempt to make the appeal of the subject more imminent and timely. Christ and the children combine a near triangular shape in the design. The children in the mural represent the white and the colored race in equal acceptance in the eyes of God. This particular triangle of Christ and the children assumes the center of interest in the mural since it is on the eye level and in a position to attract the attention of a pre-adolescent child. Because this triangle encloses the center of interest, it is composed of the majority of the warm bright colors, whereas the remainder of the mural is dominated by variations of black, white and greys with touches of warm colors here and there for balance and interest. Christ's inner robe is in bright pink and his outer robe is contrasting black and white. An interesting design pattern is developed by the folds in Christ's clothing which can be viewed by the changes in the pictures, Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 5, in the appendix. Repetition of pattern movement is also used in other figures in other episodes.

From the triangle the design moves to the outer edges of the mural which illustrates some of the events of Christ's

life. From the Annunciation scene we move down a filter of light which leads us to the portion showing the Birth of Christ. The Birth of Christ is bordered in the top left by Christ as a Child in the Temple and below the Baptism of Christ which is followed by the bottom left presentation of the Temptation. The chronology then moves over to the right side by the directional movement given by the green foreground. On the right side is Palm Sunday, followed above by the Last Supper and The Garden of Gethsemene. In the top right is the Crucifixion and to its left is the tomb of the Resurrection. Directly above the center triangle is the figure of Christ in a cloud which represents the Ascension. Christ, in the Ascension scene, is in the same angle as Christ's head in the center triangle.

The complete design of the mural has a slight suggestion of perspective in depth in that the larger figures appear closer, and the smaller figures seem to recede into the distance. Also the figure interests become smaller as they move closer to the top of the mural. The mural was planned to contain design features such as smaller interest areas in the folds of the clothing, ripples in the water, and such, that would add variety to the flat color areas at fairly close range.

The writer's mural is harmonious in that certain forms, colors, and textures have been repeated and emphasized.

Continuity is introduced by repetition and progression in the design. Repetition is developed by the fold patterns used over and over again, and through the use of color. The use of the fold pattern greatly relieves the appearances of otherwise monotonous blank spaces in the mural. Progression is produced by the colors and size, color from gray to the dull to the very bright of a color and the sizes from very small to large, or large to small.

All of the preliminary drawings were three inches to the foot in scale and were drawn on brown kraft paper. One of the original drawings was drawn in pen and ink, shown in Figure 1. The second picture, Figure 2, was painted in tempera colors.

CHAPTER III

EXECUTION

After a two-week drying period the plastered wall was ready for light sanding. After the sanding with a fine grain of sandpaper the plastered wall was prepared for painting with two thin coats of Liquitex gesso. Liquitex gesso is a ready-to-use liquid painting ground material that can be thinned with water. The gesso can be applied to virtually any surface to quickly prepare it for painting. Liquitex gesso dries quickly, evenly, and with great brilliance. Because of its acrylic emulsion base, it has the phenomenal property of staying on top on porous surfaces. It has excellent adhesion, extreme flexibility, and intense whiteness that does not discolor with age. The gesso was applied with a three inch brush. The wall surface was again sanded between coats and after the final coat.

The actual transfer of the design from the lay-outs to the wall was accomplished by enlarging the drawing from its scale in inches, with three inches representing one foot. The lay-outs were three inches to the foot. The wall was divided into foot squares by the use of a yard stick and charcoal. Full size drawings were sketched directly on the wall in a good grade of stick charcoal. Excess amounts

of the charcoal medium or superfluous lines could be removed by using a chamois skin or by simply blowing on the lines. If all appearance of the line was needed to be erased a wet cloth would remove it. Some straight lines were drawn by the use of a yardstick. Minor changes and improvements were made after the drawing was completed on the wall. On the wall changes seemed necessary because of a different perspective in the enlargement on the wall compared to the small lay-out. By looking at Figure 2 and the finished mural, Figure 5, a change can be observed on the drawing on the wall. The arms, hands, legs and feet have been improved.

After the drawing was completed to the writer's satisfaction, the writer used a rag and whipped it against the wall to get the excess charcoal removed, leaving a very faint line.

Jars of various sizes were accumulated for mixing the chosen Liquitex colors. Titanium white was mixed with all colors to achieve the desired color. Liquitex Artist's Colors come ready to use. Each of the pigments has been carefully selected, not only for its permanency, but also for its reliability in this particular medium. Because the Liquitex vehicle in its wet state is actively alkaline, certain of the traditional pigments to which the artist is accustomed cannot be used. Liquitex is a highly versatile

paint designed for use on all surfaces. Liquitex is a brand name for a polymer emulsion which was chosen because of its durability, its waterproof characteristics, and its alkali proof ingredients which make it specifically adapted for use over plaster. The paint was also recommended to the writer by Professor Hess and a student Richard Heggen. The murals mentioned in the first chapter by Professor Hess and the murals mentioned in the second chapter by Thomas Benton were painted in "Liquitex".

The artist chose the following palette of colors in order to obtain the colors desired for his mural, Titanium White, Mars Black, Burnt Umber, Cadmium Red Medium, Cerulean Blue, Chromium Oxide Green, Cobalt Blue, Hansa Yellow Light, Hooker's Green, Phthalocyanine Green, Thioindigo Violet, Ultramarine Blue and Yellow Oxide. For thinning the colors Liquitex Matte and Polymer Medium, Liquitex Matte Varnish and water was used.

All painting on the mural required two coats of Liquitex; one coat left a streaked appearance. Brushes of various sizes were used arranging in size from number 2 to number 12.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY

Designing and executing a religious mural for a church or Sunday School room, which was the creative project discussed in this report, led to many conclusions. One such conclusion would be that a mural must fulfill the function for which it was intended. With this idea in mind it is reasonable to assume that care must be exercised in choosing the information depicted in a mural in regard to the people for whom it exists. The artist cannot suppose that others have shared the same experiences as his and therefore must simplify the information he wishes to advance by stating it in terms that will be understood by all. Simplicity is also desirable in rendering subject matter, for complex arrangements are not easily understood by an ever moving public.

Planning the design for a project such as a mural must include a well thought out plan of the psychological as well as the physical aspects which the artist wants to promote in the work. A detailed plan of the possible vantage points for viewing the wall, combined with the placement of parts in relationship to those vantage points and to the entire format of the area, must be foremost in the mind of

the artist as he designs. This plan, coupled with the idea of respecting the surface to which it is applied, comprises the major physical limitations to which a mural painter must adhere if his work is to be honest, satisfying and powerful. Portrayal of subject matter, method of rendering, and stylization must be altered in a mural painting to the place of becoming a common denominator of expression between the artist and his viewers. Subject matter combined with the decorative manner in which it is conveyed enables the artist to promote both the psychological and physical aspects that fit the occasion. Limitations other than those dictated by the area and the shape of the wall are to be considered by the muralist who must adhere to the decisions of those for whom the mural is being painted.

A study of the painting medium led to the conclusion that "polymer emulsion" is a desirable and inexpensive paint which can be applied to nearly any surface with full assurance that it will remain durable, non-fading and washable. Ease with which polymer can be used also makes it a desirable medium of expression. Because its make-up is such that it can be thinned with water, polymer is easily mixed.

Conclusions as to the success of the mural and its probable appeal can be objectively studied in this instance, for at the time of writing of this creative project the mural has been in existence for nearly three and one-half

months. Favorable acceptance upon completion of the mural has been stated by congregation members, Sunday School children, the parish administrator and pastor. A colored photograph of the completed mural appears in Figure 6.

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APPENDIX



Figure Preliminary ine rawing



Figure 2. Preliminary tempera painting.

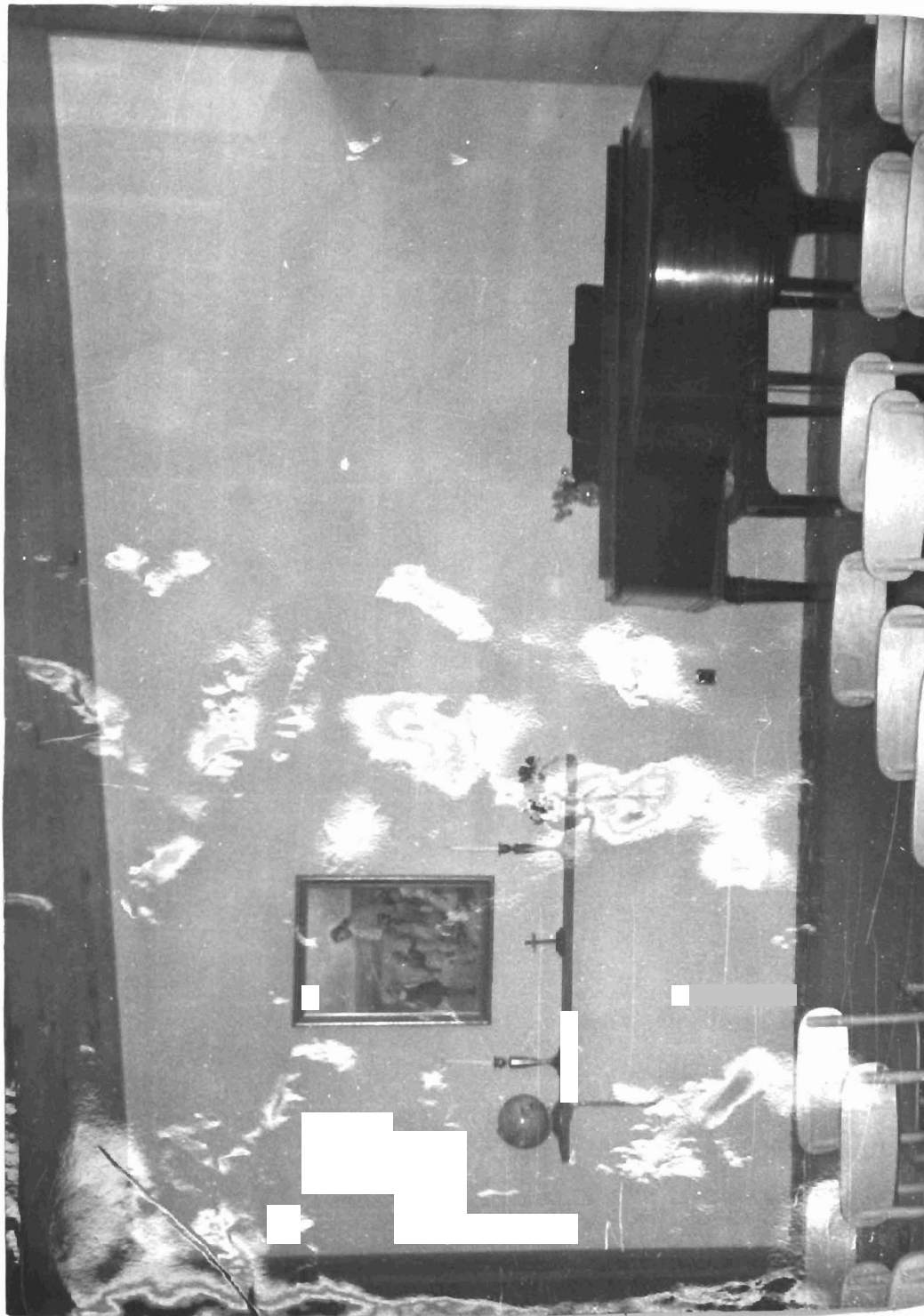


Figure Sunday School before ering.

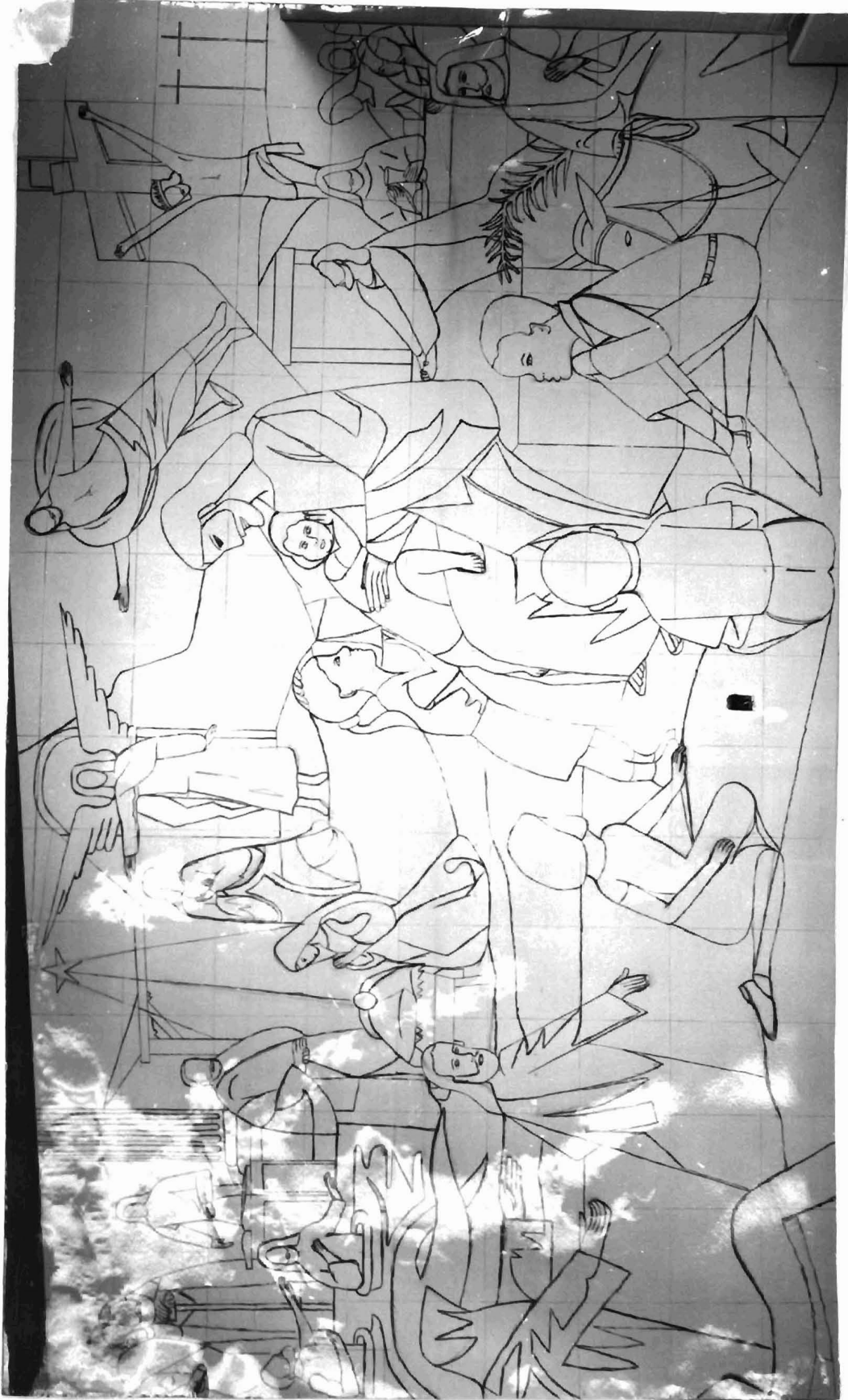


Figure 4. Charcoal drawing on the plastered wall.



Figure 5. Finished mural in black and white.



Figure 6. Finished mural in color.